Was Merriman Smith the Best White House Reporter Ever?

Over the course of six presidencies he was the man to beat; but can his reputation survive a tarnished legacy?

August 11, 2026 **by Dan McCue < https://www.thewellnews.com/custom-authors/dan-mccue/>**

WASHINGTON — The telephone was the thing.

It was mounted beneath the dashboard of the White House press-pool car, a bulky, two-way VHF radio transceiver wired to a standard telephone handset that connected the user directly into the local Dallas telephone exchange.

It also happened to be the only mobile phone available to the 54 reporters traveling with President John F. Kennedy through Dallas.

Spying it inside the gray-blue 1960 Chevrolet on loan from Southwestern Bell, Merriman Smith had insisted on taking the front passenger seat.

He liked gadgets. More than that, he liked the advantage they offered.

The other reporters in the wire car — Associated Press reporter Jack Bell, Bob Clark of ABC News and Robert Baskin of The Dallas Morning News — laughed at the arrangement, considering the latest installment of what had become a running joke.

Merriman Smith, a native of Savannah, Georgia, spent 30 years on the White House beat for United Press International.

Smith, known to nearly everyone as Smitty, was usually the only reporter who wanted to sit beside the telephone. On Nov. 22, 1963, the joke would turn deadly serious.

When three shots rang out across Dealey Plaza, Smith, a marksman himself, immediately recognized the sound of gunfire.

By the time the other reporters in the car realized something terrible had happened, Smith had seized the handset and called the United Press International bureau.

“Urgent,” he yelled into the phone.

“Three shots fired at President Kennedy’s motorcade today in downtown Dallas,” he said.

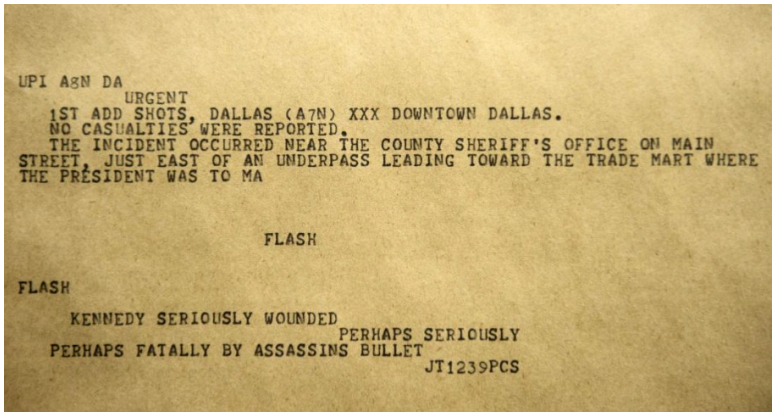
The bulletin went out on the wire at 12:34 p.m., four minutes after the shooting.

By then, Jack Bell was throwing punches at the back of Smith’s head and pounding his back and shoulders.

“Give me the goddamn phone!” he yelled.

Smith crouched down in the seat and held on. He was not surrendering the line until UPI had the story. The car was still moving toward Parkland Hospital. Nobody yet knew precisely what had happened. Smith had only fragments: the gunfire, the sudden movement of the motorcade, the possibility that the president had been wounded. But he understood the first obligation of the wire reporter. Get the first fact out. Then keep gathering.

“On a story of this magnitude,” he later said, “I was not about to let it go until I knew the office had it all.”



UPI A8N DA
URGENT
1ST ADD SHOTS, DALLAS (A7N) XXX DOWNTOWN DALLAS.
NO CASUALTIES WERE REPORTED.
THE INCIDENT OCCURRED NEAR THE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE ON MAIN STREET, JUST EAST OF AN UNDERPASS LEADING TOWARD THE TRADE MART WHERE THE PRESIDENT WAS TO MA

FLASH

FLASH
KENNEDY SERIOUSLY WOUNDED
PERHAPS SERIOUSLY
PERHAPS FATALLY BY ASSASSINS BULLET
JT1239PCS

Two of Merriman Smith’s dispatches from Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

That sentence contains the whole man. It is not a sentence about truth in the abstract. It is about possession.

The story was something he had to hold until he had exhausted it, something he could not release to a competitor, an editor or the world until he knew that his office had every usable fact.

Smith was fifty years old that day. His marriage had broken down. He was short of money. The night before leaving Washington, he had taken a sheaf of thank you notes from his editors and thrown them into the incinerator of his apartment building.

“That’s where this sort of crap belongs,” he wrote in an angry memo. “That is how much it is worth.”

The next day he produced the most important work of his life.

The lingering question all these decades later is whether the qualities he exhibited that day in Dallas made him the best White House reporter ever — or were they the very traits that ultimately led to his demise by his own hand.

The Room With Forty Telephones

To understand Smith, it helps to understand the room that made him.

The White House press room of his era was not the briefing room so many television viewers are familiar with today.

It was a cramped, eighteen-by-forty-foot space with ceiling-high windows, where ten desks were pressed against one another, cigarette smoke flourished, and the rare silence was interrupted by the ringing of one or more of the forty telephones scattered about the place.

When they all rang at once, Smith wrote in the first of his several books, the sound resembled “a concert by a swarm of drunken Swiss bell ringers.”

But for the denizens of the press room, it was almost home. The vast majority of the reporters spent most of their waking hours there.

And as they waited for news to break, they read newspapers constantly.

By lunchtime, Smith once said, he routinely worked through the Washington Post, the Washington Times-Herald, The New York Times, the New York Herald Tribune and the Baltimore Sun. After lunch came the afternoon papers.

The room had but one other permanent feature, a couch, over which reporters competed so they could catch a brief nap before the White House inevitably released a late day batch of documents and statements.

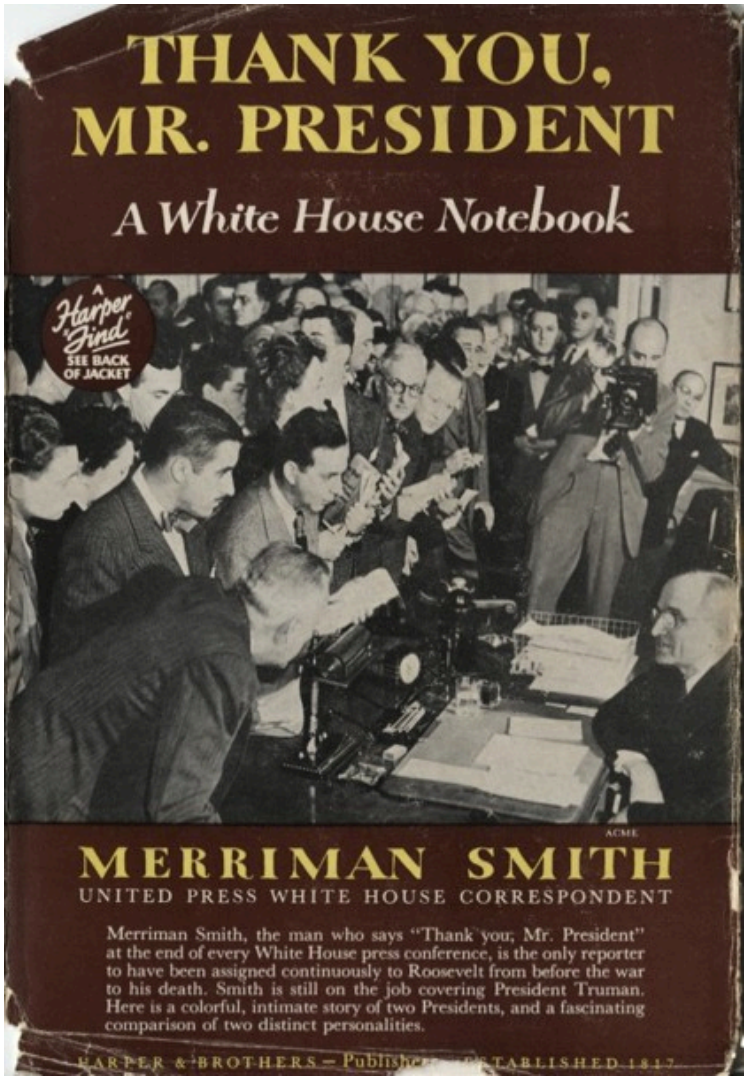
Mornings in the press room typically began when a White House young assistant pinned the president’s schedule to the battered press room bulletin board.

The appearance of the schedule would send the wire reporters scrambling. After taking down the day’s events and calling to dictate them to their respective news desks, it was time to hurry to the lobby of the executive office, where they’d wait to intercept the president’s visitors as they emerged.

“Well, senator,” a reporter might ask, “what’s on your mind today? What did you take up with the president?”

Most visitors fell into one of three categories — they had either stopped by to “pay respects,” made a “courtesy call,” or were an “old

friend" of the president.



The cover of Merriman Smith's "Thank You, Mr. President."

Any bit of news that might be gleaned from such encounters was promptly called in to the office.

Then the reporters went back to their telephones.

Smith understood the banality of the work. He also understood its stakes. The White House correspondent was, as he put it, the most direct channel between the president and the public.

As far as he was concerned, the nation's citizens possessed a kind of property right in the presidency. The reporter's task was to keep the owners informed about what their property was doing.

That conviction could sound grandiose. Smith himself could be grandiose. But it gave moral weight to the drudgery. He was not merely waiting for presidents to make history. He was watching

them closely enough to record the small movements by which history announced itself.

The Man Who Ended the Conference

The presidential press conference was the purest expression of Smith's temperament.

In his earliest years on the beat, the 1940s, reporters crowded into the president's oval office, standing wall to wall.

Smith compared the sessions to some combination of a high school track meet, bear baiting and "the third degree administered by heavy-handed plain-clothes men."

The rules were deliberately murky. Presidential remarks might be quoted only with permission.

"Background" meant the information could be used but not attributed. "Off the record" meant it could not be used at all.

Smith observed that presidents rarely said anything especially important off the record. Usually they were explaining why they could not answer.

How the proceedings went was entirely up to the temperament of the president. Franklin Roosevelt, Smith said, was a complex man who could be cordial and charming one moment and cold and dismissive the next.

Oftentimes he'd dress down reporters in front of their colleagues, accusing them of being liars and worse.

The press conference would end when the senior wire reporter decided the news possibilities of the day's gathering with the president had been exhausted.

When that time came, Smith would say the words that became his signature: “Thank you, Mr. President.”

By the time he reached the final word, he was already moving toward the door.

The scene at an early press briefing by President Harry S. Truman in the Oval Office. (Photo from the cover of Merriman Smith’s book “Thank you, Mr. President.”

His colleagues watched the ritual with a mixture of admiration and irritation.

Realizing the press conference was running out of steam, Smith would rise, call the proceedings to an end, and then rush to the nearest phone, composing the story in his head before he was within 10 steps of the press room.

On occasion, his colleagues marveled with a hint of resentment, Smith would dictate several dispatches at once.

He would give the first paragraph of one story, shift to the lead of a second, then a third and a fourth, returning to each in turn. Within half an hour, each story was complete: lucid, informed and, those same colleagues recalled, almost free of error.

Smith’s news writing was not literary in the conventional sense. It was more muscular than that.

He gave the essential action immediately —who had done what, where and with what consequence — then made the event "visible" to the reader through his inclusion of telling details.

Diplomacy might be represented by roast pheasant and fried hominy meeting participants had for lunch. The Potsdam conference became a room with Truman at the head of a table and Stalin at his right. National mourning became flowers placed aboard a funeral train, bare heads beside the railroad tracks and a crowd taking up a hymn.

He preferred active verbs. Leaders served ultimatums. Meetings cleared the way. Crowds lined the tracks. Political defeats swept parties from Congress. Even when dealing with abstractions, he attached them to physical action.

His language was commonplace. That was part of its power. Lunch. Golf. Work. Trains. Flowers. Office hours. He did not need ornate prose to make an institution human. He used familiar words in revealing arrangements: ceremony against consequence, leisure against duty, rumor against fact, public grandeur against private exhaustion.

He was also careful about uncertainty. He separated official statements from reports, predictions from evidence and observation from speculation. A forceful lead did not give him permission to pretend he knew more than he did.

That restraint mattered. Smith's writing moved quickly, but it did not confuse speed with certainty.

Warm Springs

He had learned the rhythm of presidential death before Dallas.

In April 1945, the three wire-service reporters who accompanied President Franklin Roosevelt to Warm Springs, Georgia, found themselves with time on their hands.

During one of the long afternoons Smith spent on the porch of William Hassett, the president's secretary, the two men got to talking about hush puppies and Brunswick stew.

"I'll bet the president hasn't had any Brunswick stew in years. He'd probably enjoy some," Hassett said.

The next thing Smith knew, he and Hassett were making plans for a barbecue dinner — complete with Brunswick stew — with Ruth Stevens, manager of the Warm Springs Hotel.

Smith later described her as "one of the finest, most saintly women of our time" while also noting that "she cusses like a sailor."

It was a quality that had endeared her to everyone in the White House traveling party — including Roosevelt.

Together Stevens and the owner of the hotel, Frank Allcorn, who was also Warm Springs' mayor, lined up the chef, his assistant, and a group of "hillbilly musicians." A cook who specialized in making Brunswick stew was to be brought in from a nearby town.

The barbecue would be held on the afternoon of April 12, and the guests would be only the president's staff, the three wire service reporters, Stevens and Allcorn.

The majority of guests were expected at 4 p.m., with the president scheduled to arrive half an hour later.

As 4:20 came and went, Smith began to be concerned. "Why hasn't the president's secretarial staff arrived for the party?"

As the minutes ticked by, he had visions of a traffic jam on the narrow one-way road preventing Roosevelt's arrival.

Franklin D. Roosevelt at Warm Springs (National Archives and Records Administration)

Finally, he made his way to the short wave radio the Secret Service had set up in Allcorn's barn.

As he waited for a connection to the Little White House, he looked out onto the party.

"A warm spring sun bathed the valley below the small mountain and the air was an appetizing combination of odors — the crisp, crackling fat of the hogs, the warm pungency of the Brunswick stew and the added touch of civilization — the slightly barroom smell coming from a table laden with old fashioneds," Smith said.

When he was finally connected, the sergeant at the other end of the line seemed to know as little as Smith did about the cause of the delay.

"Nothing moving as yet," he said.

Smith next made his way to Allcorn's cottage, where he called the White House switchboard from an old-style crank phone.

Louise Hackmeister, the chief operator, answered, but sounded strange, Smith thought.

She told him Hassett wanted him to gather the two other wire service operators and get to his cottage as fast as they could.

“I can’t say any more,” she said. “Just get down here as fast as you can.”

As they started down the mountain road, the three seasoned journalists speculated about why they were being summoned with such urgency. They agreed it was to be told that Germany had surrendered and that the war in Europe was over.

Smith was the first of the reporters to enter Hassett’s cottage. Hassett was standing near the fireplace in the living room, looking ashen.

On the couch, Grace Tully and her assistant, Dorothy Brady were crying softly.

“I honestly had no exact idea of what was happening, but I knew it was big and tragic,” Smith said later.

He grabbed the nearest telephone, which happened to be on the radiator, about two feet from where he had been standing.

Hassett cleared his throat. He fiddled with the few slips of paper he held in his hands.

Smith placed an urgent call to UPI.

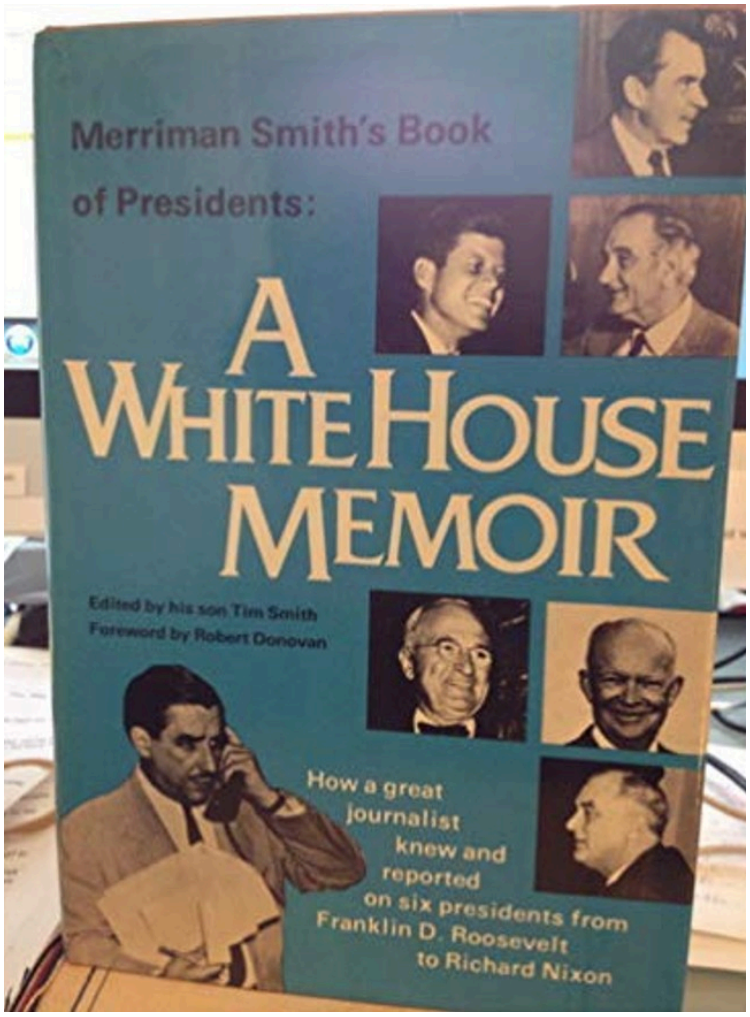
“Gentleman,” Hassett said, “it is my sad duty to inform you that the president … died at 3:35 this afternoon.”

“Flash!” Smith roared into the telephone.

“Preisident Roosevelt died at 3:35. Warm Springs. This is Smith.”

"Dictate," the voice on the other end of the phone said.

Smith and the other wire service reporters would continue to dictate dispatches, stopping only to gather more notes, for the next several hours.



The cover of "Merriman Smith's Book of Presidents: A White House Memoir."

At one point Howard Bruenn, the Navy doctor who was with Roosevelt when he died, entered the room.

"It was just like a bolt of lightning or getting hit by a train," he said as he mopped his face with a limp handkerchief.

"One minute he was alive and laughing. The next minute — wham."

"Did you see it coming?" the reporters asked.

"This wasn't the sort of thing you could forecast," Bruenn said. "Doctors just can't say 'this man is going to have a cerebral

hemorrhage.' It doesn't happen that way. He'd been feeling fine."

Smith recalled that days earlier, on April 5, he and his colleagues had been summoned to the LIttle White House for a briefing by the president.

The president, he remembered, was sitting in his favorite spot, in front of the living room fireplace, and was in a friendly and easy mood.

The only thing off was how the president's hands trembled as he fitted a cigarette into his famous scorched ivory holder.

It was to be the president's last press conference. Smith would never have another extended conversation with him.

They did, however, encounter each other one last time, two days before Roosevelt died.

At the time, the reporter was on the back of what he described as a "very nasty horse" that he had rented for the afternoon from the local drugstore. Roosevelt, meanwhile, had asked his driver to take him out for a quiet drive in his little open coupe.

When Smith reigned in the horse to let the president pass, Roosevelt "bowed majestically to me" and as the car slowly moved away, the president turned and with a smile said, "Hi-ho, Silver!"

"As far as I was concerned, those were his last words," Smith wrote later.

In actual fact, Roosevelt spoke his last words just before 1:15 p.m. on April 12.

At the time he was killing two birds with one stone, looking over the latest batch of official papers that had arrived from Washington

that morning and posing at the same time for Elizabeth Shumatov, who was painting his portrait.

By all accounts, Roosevelt had been in exceptional spirits all day and feeling so much better that Bruenn made a glowing report on his health to Admiral Ross McIntire, the president's chief physician, back in Washington.

Looking out a nearby window, the president remarked what a fine day it was going to be for a barbecue.

Then suddenly, he clapped his hand to the back of his head. His checks sagged.

"I have a terrific headache," Roosevelt said softly.

With that, he slumped into his wheelchair.

Someone yelled "The president has fainted."

By the time the president's valet and others carried his body from the chair into his small bedroom nearby, it was clear a catastrophe had occurred.

For the next several hours, Smith and the other wire service reporters who had been on hand carried the entire brunt of the coverage that was to follow.

He wrote all night. When the typewriter stopped producing words, a message arrived from Washington asking for another piece. The typewriter began again. He packed clothing into bags, joined the funeral train and slept almost not at all.

Smith later wrote, "I saw him start to die. And I was there to report his actual death."

That formulation was characteristic. He did not say he had understood Roosevelt's decline. He said he had seen it. The

reporter's authority came from presence, from being near enough to notice what other people missed and disciplined enough to make the detail usable.

The Facts Beneath the Legend

Smith's proximity to presidents gave him access. It also made him familiar with their weaknesses.

He cultivated everybody: press secretaries, appointment secretaries, Secret Service agents, gardeners, doormen and groundskeepers. He shared the Secret Service's interest in guns. He maintained friendships with officials in several administrations, including people who could provide information unavailable to outsiders.

The closeness did not necessarily make him soft. His son Tim recalled during an event at the National Press Club that his father could be close to a president and still write a critical story "10 out of 10 times."

The friendship helped him get into the room. It did not determine what he wrote once he was there.

Smith's own principle was direct: a journalist should accentuate the actual, even as the government sought to accentuate the positive.

"The trouble starts, when we refuse to accept as gospel some of the rubbish a government spews out in the name of news," Smith said.

But the same man who insisted on accuracy could be arrogant, territorial and exclusionary.

His competitiveness was not an attractive abstraction. It could mean taking the telephone and refusing to give it up. It could mean keeping a scoop from a colleague standing 10 feet away. It could mean treating a young reporter as a subordinate rather than an equal.

Gwen Gibson, who worked with him during the Eisenhower years, remembered being made his assistant — and, in her words, his "handmaiden."

Merriman Smith (center) with President John F. Kennedy (left) in a photo used on the dust jacket of Smith's book "The Good New Days." The book was subtitled "A not entirely reverent study of native habits and customs in modern Washington."

He instructed her to watch houses, attend conferences and wait for the president's movements. He looked over her leads and told her when they were wrong.

"That's not the lead," he would say. "You've got to rewrite this."

Smith eventually helped Gibson and Helen Thomas enter the previously all-male White House Correspondents' Association.

But his record was contradictory. In later years, the association determined that he had supported restrictions excluding Black and female journalists from membership in the National Press Club and from the annual correspondents' dinner.

In 2022, it removed his name from the award honoring deadline reporting.

The contradiction is not incidental. Smith believed intensely in the public's right to know, but he did not consistently believe that every journalist belonged in the room. He could defend access as a democratic principle while helping police the boundaries of who received it.

His journalism was more expansive than his democracy.

A President at the Card Table

In his features, Smith's method changed without losing its center.

The wire story had to strike first. The feature could wait. It could circle. It could let the answer emerge.

A feature about President Dwight D. Eisenhower's penchant for golf began with the "volunteer scorekeepers," the people who counted the president's rounds and treated recreation as evidence of neglect.

Smith arranged the article as an argument and counterargument. Critics counted what they believed to be rounds of gold. The schedule complicated the count. Rumor inflated it. The president's doctor supplied a correction: Eisenhower needed more exercise, not less.

In "Eisenhower's Secret for Happy Retirement," Smith followed a day rather than a controversy.

He began with the landscape around Gettysburg and moved through breakfast, newspapers, correspondence, visitors, writing and recreation.

The lesson the story of Eisenhower's retirement was supposed to impart — keep fit, keep busy — was not announced at the outset. It was demonstrated by the schedule the former president kept on the day they spent together.

And in "How Truman Played Poker," the card table itself became a miniature White House.

Smith had played with Truman. He knew the games, the nicknames, the rules and the personalities. The "Augusta" and the "Williamsburg," the presidential train and Key West became an insider's map.

Merriman Smith's grave at Arlington National Cemetery. (Photo by Dan McCue)

Technical explanation established the credibility of the piece; repartee supplied atmosphere.

Smith often used private pastimes as character tests. Golf exposed the conflict between duty and leisure. Poker exposed judgment, bluff and appetite. A president's working routine revealed discipline — or its absence.

Smith's quotations were economical. In straight news, they authenticated an official position or sharpened a dispute.

In features, they created social weather. A doctor's statement could rebut a political accusation. A president's joke could establish a room. A line such as "It's a grand old game" was not evidence. It was a piece of remembered life.

He could also recognize when not to quote. In his account of Roosevelt's funeral train, the mourners' gestures carried more force than predictable statements. Bare heads, tears, flowers and a hymn told the story.

His best writing did not tell the reader what to feel. It arranged facts until feeling became unavoidable.

Dallas

At Parkland Hospital, Smith saw the president face down in the limousine. Jacqueline Kennedy cradled his head. Governor John Connally lay on the floor, blood spreading across his suit.

Smith asked Secret Service agent Clint Hill, "How badly was he hit?"

"He's dead," Hill replied.

Smith ran into the hospital and commandeered a telephone from a clerk behind the glass of a teller-style booth.

He dictated while stretchers carrying Kennedy and Connally passed behind him. He clung to the phone because telephones were scarce, because the line was the connection to UPI and because, in his mind, the story was not yet safely in the world.

Then Malcolm Kilduff, the White House deputy press secretary, announced Kennedy's death. Smith threw down the phone and ran

upstairs. He filed again. He was ordered to the airport. The telephone car had already left. He and Sid Davis and Charles Roberts persuaded a policeman to drive them through the Dallas traffic.

At Love Field, Smith found a bank of telephone booths. UPI's Dallas bureau was busy. Washington was busy. New York answered. He told the bureau that Lyndon Johnson was about to be sworn in aboard Air Force One.

Smith crossed the runway and boarded the plane.

Twenty-seven people were crowded into the presidential suite. The cabin was hot and dim. Jacqueline Kennedy entered in the same pink suit she had worn that morning. Judge Sarah Hughes held a Bible. Johnson took the oath. "Now, let's get airborne," he said.

Smith watched and recorded.

He lost his portable typewriter somewhere around the hospital, so he wrote on an oversized electric machine that had belonged to JFK's secretary. He worked beside the coffin. He watched Kennedy sit beside it. He noticed Theodore Sorensen wilted in a chair, crying softly. That detail became the emotional center of his Pulitzer-winning story:

"The dignity of his deep grief seemed to sum up all of the tragedy and sadness of the previous six hours."

This was not merely speed. Speed got him the bulletin. Experience got him onto the airplane. Writing skill turned the chaos into narrative.

His story began with a sunny afternoon and a motorcade moving through what appeared to be a park. Then came the "almost painfully loud" cracks. The car stood still for seconds that seemed

like a lifetime. The president's vehicle vanished around a curve. Parkland appeared. The reporters spilled out.

Smith's verbs carried the reader through the day: heard, screamed, careened, skidded, raced, clung, sped, slammed, trotted. The prose was plain, but never inert. It moved because he moved.

He did not pretend to possess the whole event. He recorded what he saw, what he was told and what he could not see. He placed uncertainty beside fact. Blood spattered the limousine. Hill said Kennedy was dead. The doctors had not yet arrived. The announcement came later.

That is why the story has lasted. It is not only a scoop. It is a model of how to write through incomplete knowledge without surrendering either accuracy or drama.

The Cost of Being Ready

The people around Smith admired his energy and worried about it.

He traveled more than 125,000 miles following presidents. While other reporters rested at Key Biscayne or Hyannis Port, he might hire a boat or find another way to keep up with the president.

Because wire-service wages were low, he used every available platform to supplement them.

He wrote columns, books and magazine pieces. He gave speeches. He appeared on late-night television.

But mostly he worked because he loved the work. He also worked because stopping would have forced him to confront what the work had displaced.

He had a drinking problem. He was briefly removed from the White House beat, reportedly because of it, and returned after appearing

to regain control. He was divorced. His first son, Captain Albert Merriman Smith Jr., died in 1966 from injuries suffered in a helicopter crash in Vietnam.

After his son's death, Smith wrote to President Johnson that his boy "did not die for an empty cause."

"Nor was he a war maker," the anguished father continued. "His hope was yours, Mr. President. Peace, or at least a chance for a better life for others."

In another letter to Johnson, Smith observed that in the world of government and politics, as they relate to the world of news "there have been differences and injuries in the past, and they are bound to happen again."

Still, he wrote in a sentence that sounds like a private rule, perhaps even a warning to himself:

"I must try to be accurate and honest, and this may displease both of us at times. But if it is mine to decide, I'll never try to hurt."

It is difficult to reconcile that promise with the man who could be so cruelly competitive, so resentful of praise, so willing to make his work the measure of every relationship.

But perhaps the tension explains him better than either version alone. He understood the difference between reporting hard and hurting people. He did not always control the difference.

His friends remembered someone who loved people — especially those overlooked by the powerful. He mentored young reporters. He treated minor White House employees with respect.

He could be generous and funny, a magnificent storyteller who dominated the lobby with embroidered tales.

He could also be bitter. He could be overbearing. He could make the people closest to him live in the shadow of his deadline.

Tom Johnson was a young White House assistant to Johnson's press secretary when he met Smith in the mid-1960s; he would later go on to become publisher of the Los Angeles Times and then CEO of CNN.

Speaking of Smith at a National Press Club event in 2016, Johnson observed that workaholism is almost as dangerous as alcoholism.

Smith's life suggests that the two may feed one another. The beat gave him purpose, status and a permanent emergency in which he did not have to examine himself. As long as the telephone rang, he knew what to do.

The Answer On the Line

In April 1970, Merriman Smith was still the chief White House correspondent for UPI. He had covered six presidents, from Roosevelt through Nixon. He was fifty-seven.

He had been ill for a time the previous December, but recovered in time to cover the beginning of the Nixon administration the next month.

In late March 1970, Smith was briefly admitted to a hospital not far from his home on North Picket Street in Alexandria, Va., but he recovered sufficiently from the undisclosed illness to resume making final arrangements for the entertainment for the upcoming White House Correspondents' Association dinner.

On the morning of April 13, he called his office and said he had a severe cold and would not be coming to work.

That evening, shortly before dinner, his wife Gailey found him in a bathroom at their home. There was a bullet wound to his head. A

revolver lay nearby.

The news moved through Washington with the bluntness of a wire bulletin.

Merriman Smith is dead.

Nixon said there was “deep sadness at the White House.” Smith, he said, was “an institution here and throughout the country and beyond.”

At the end of a press conference May 8, 1970, concentrating on the Kent State shootings and his decision to expand the war into Cambodia, Nixon called on the White House press corps to stand in Smith’s remembrance.

At a memorial service, hundreds of Washington journalists gathered as Smith’s ashes were buried at Arlington National Cemetery beside the grave of his son.

The honor was bestowed on the newsman, who never served in the military himself, by special permission of the Commanding General of the Military District of Washington.

But it came with something of an ironic twist. Smith’s grave in Section 32 is less than 100 yards from that of Kennedy’s grave at Arlington. And in a further twist, the reporter’s grave faces that of the president’s, the only one in the section to do so.

It’s almost as if, ever vigilant, he remains on the presidential beat to this day.

The practical answer to the question — was Merriman Smith the best White House reporter ever? — is not the Pulitzer he won for his coverage of the Kennedy assassination, the Medal of Freedom or the title on an award that later lost his name. It is the telephone.

When the news conference ended, Smith said, “Thank you, Mr. President,” and ran.

When Roosevelt died, he grabbed the nearest line and shouted, “Flash!”

When Kennedy was shot, he heard what others did not yet understand, took the only phone and held it while the competing reporter beat him.

He believed the reporter’s job was to be there when something happened. Not nearby. Not informed later. There.

That devotion produced extraordinary journalism. It also consumed the man who practiced it. Smith made himself indispensable by refusing to step away from the story, and he became trapped inside that refusal.

So was he the best White House reporter ever?

He might have answered bluntly. Find the telephone. Get the facts right. Hold the line until the office has it all. Then run.

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